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ALFRED

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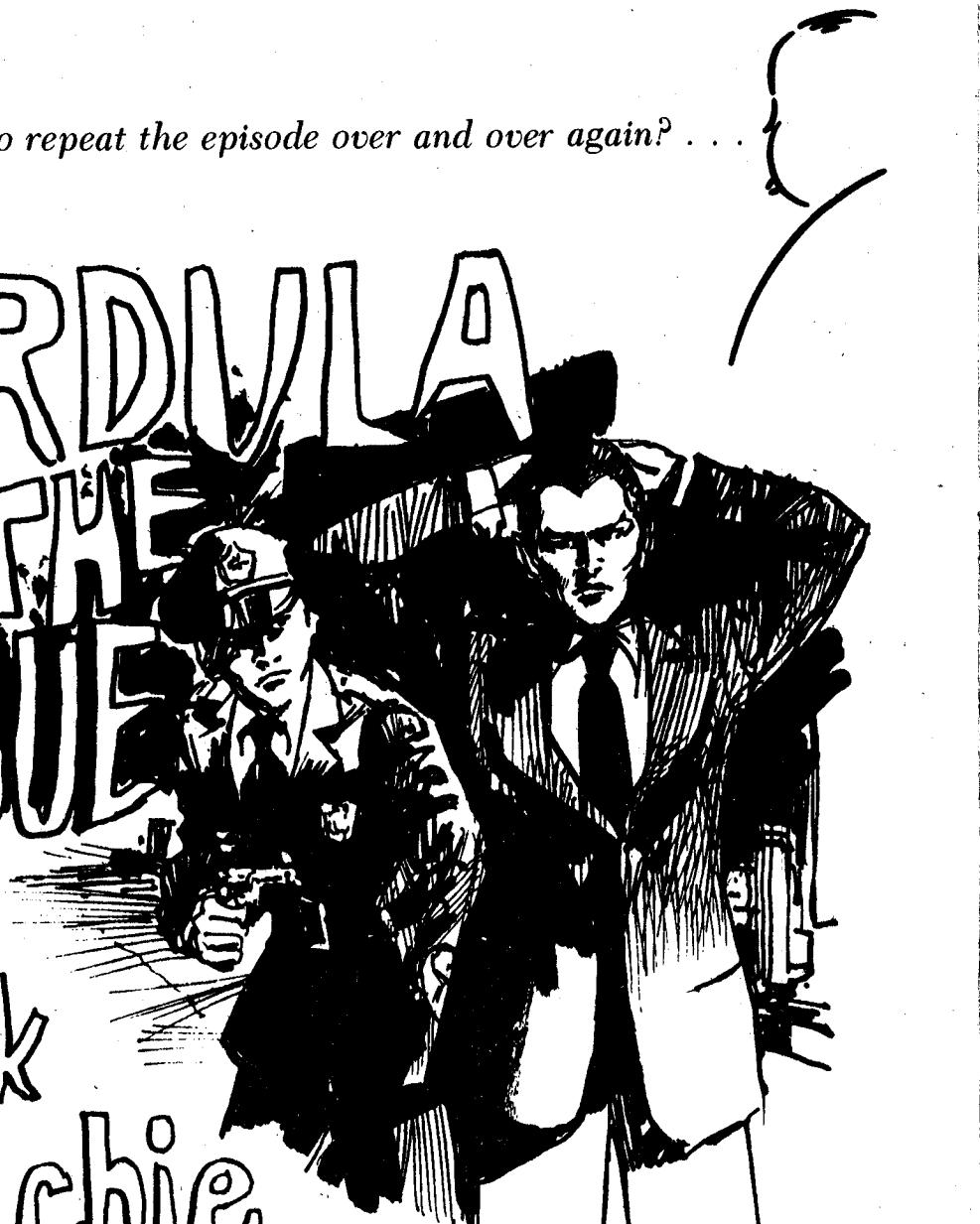
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Was he doomed to repeat the episode over and over again? . . .

CARDVLA TO THE RESCUE

by
**Jack
Ritchie**



Half a block ahead of me, the masked man sprang from the shadow of a public telephone booth and pounced upon the woman's handbag.

She clung desperately to its straps, thereby initiating a grim tug-of-war.

Even at this late hour, there were perhaps a half a dozen pedestrians within aiding distance, but they quickly turned their faces and scuttled away.

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CARDUL

I sighed. People simply do not want to become involved any more.

I dashed forward and grasped the hoodlum's right wrist with sufficient firmness to rearrange the bones of his carpus. He shrieked, of course, and released the handbag. I then lifted him high overhead and tossed him some thirty feet onto a metal trash container at the curb. It collapsed under his weight and he lay inert among the ruins of metal, paper napkins, and old newspapers.

I turned to the woman, who was approximately in her middle twenties and had dark hair and violet eyes.

"Madam," I said, "I trust that you are not injured?"

Her eyes were still wide. "I don't think so."

I indicated the phone booth. "I shall summon the police immediately."

Her eyes flickered. "I don't think that's really necessary. I mean, there was no harm done. After all, he didn't get the purse. Why bring the police into this?"

I noted the initials E.W. on the brooch she wore. "Madam, you are indeed generous-hearted. However, the odds are that this scoundrel has snatched dozens of purses and will continue to snatch more until some public-spirited citizen, such as yourself, sees that he is put behind bars by testifying against him."

I spied the lights of a police cruiser down the block and waved.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"Flagging down a squad car."

She glared. "Why don't you mind your own damn business." Then she turned and disappeared into a dark alley between two buildings.

I blinked and then moved to the still-unconscious man amidst the debris. I pulled the nylon stocking from his head. He seemed to be in his middle thirties.

The squad car drew up to the curb and two officers got out. They surveyed the situation and one of them addressed me. "What happened?"

I explained.

He looked about. "I don't see no lady."

I cleared my throat. "She seems to have disappeared."

He studied the unconscious purse snatcher. "I don't see him wearing no stocking over his head."

"I took it off. It must be somewhere in that rubbish."

He sighed.

"Mister, you're in big trouble. That trash container is city property and they don't come cheap."

The second officer walked back to the car to call an ambulance.

The first officer continued to eye me suspiciously. "All I see here is one man standing and another on his back. I don't see no lady or no stocking mask. What's the real story? I think maybe we'd better take you down to headquarters until we get this straightened out."

"Officer," I said, "I am a licensed and bonded private detective. Cardula is my name." I reached for one of my cards and found myself staring into the barrel of his quickly drawn service revolver.

"Don't try nothing," he snapped. "Hands on the top of your head."

I did as directed and he proceeded to search me, but found no weapon. "Put your hands behind you."

I felt—and heard—handcuffs being snapped upon my wrists. "Now see here," I said, "this is absolutely ridiculous."

He shrugged. "So it's ridiculous. In which case your lawyer should be able to get you out in the morning."

Morning? That would never do.

I waited meekly until the arrival of the ambulance diverted his attention and then I broke away and dashed for the aperture into which the woman had disappeared.

In the darkness, I quickly shed the handcuffs and took refuge in a blind window high up on the building wall.

Below me the two officers dashed into the alleyway, their guns drawn and their flashlight beams playing about.

One of them picked up the handcuffs. "How the hell did he get out of these? They're still locked."

They continued down the passage to its other end and disappeared around the corner.

I quickly departed from the scene and went back to my office.

I found my man, Janos, waiting at the locked door, ready to drive me home.

"Janos," I said, "You have no idea what a jungle it is out there."

As we made our way back downstairs to the parking lot and our Volkswagen minibus, I related my experience.

Janos frowned thoughtfully. "That is strange indeed, sir."

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"Of course it's strange, Janos. Here I try to do my citizenly duty and I'm seized by the police."

"I mean that it is most unusual for a purse snatcher to be masked."

We entered our vehicle and Janos began driving. "What would a young woman be doing wandering around downtown at nearly four in the morning?" he wondered. "You don't suppose that she was a . . ."

"No," I said. "She looked quite respectable. Though to tell you the truth, Janos, I don't suppose that these days that is a criterion at all." I watched cross traffic as we stopped at a corner. "Janos, did you know that I can now distinguish between blood types A and B simply by the way they walk? I am quite certain she was a B."

Janos made a turn towards the freeway. "And how did your investigation of Mr. Decker go?"

"Fine," I said. "Just as Mrs. Decker suspected, her husband did not leave town on a business trip. He simply took his suitcase to the apartment of a Miss Leslie Schwendtke and he was still there when I broke off my surveillance at 3:30 this morning."

I live in a quite large Victorian mansion situated some thirty miles from the city in a comfortably desolate countryside. When we arrived home, I went directly downstairs to my quarters. I read a bit—stopping at ten minutes before sunrise—and then went to bed.

The next evening, Janos drove me directly to Miss Schwendtke's apartment and I resumed my surveillance.

At eight-thirty, Decker and Miss Schwendtke left the apartment for a motion picture theatre. I followed, of course. After the movie, they had a late dinner and a few drinks and then returned to the apartment. The lights went out shortly thereafter, but I remained on duty until 3:30 A.M., when I called it quits for the night and began my return to the office.

As I walked the street I'd used the night before, I thought I saw a familiar figure approaching.

Yes, as she came closer I recognized the same woman who had almost had her handbag snatched the previous morning.

She had nearly reached the point where the incident had occurred when a masked man sprang from the cover of a public telephone booth and grabbed for her handbag.

Once again she clung to it stubbornly and again the nearby pedestrians hurriedly disappeared.

As before, I swept down on the hoodlum. I grasped his larcenous right wrist and flung him through the air.

Too late, I realized that he was going to descend squarely on another metal trash container. It collapsed under him and he lay there senseless.

I turned to the woman and found her glaring at me.

"Damn you!" she snapped. And once again she turned and disappeared down the narrow passageway she had used the night before.

I watched her departure, shrugged, went to the recumbent figure, and removed the stocking from his head.

I blinked. Really, this was too much! It was the same man who had attempted to snatch the woman's purse earlier. I put my hand to my forehead. Was I losing my mind? Had I somehow inadvertently passed through a time warp? Was I doomed to repeat this purse-snatching episode over and over again?

If I turned now, would I see a squad car approaching?

I turned. I saw lights on the roof of a car down the street. Was it a squad car? Or a taxi?

I didn't wait to find out. I rushed to the passageway just in time to see the young woman reach the opposite street and turn to the right.

I flew quickly after her, seeing her again when I reached the opposite street. I followed her, keeping half a block behind.

She walked two blocks and then entered a large apartment building. I watched her enter the elevator and the lights above the door indicated that she got off at the nineteenth floor.

I went to the bank of mail slots in the foyer and studied those in the 1900 series. One contained a last name beginning with the letter W, and that was a Richard Walker and Elizabeth Walker in 1903.

I took the elevator to the nineteenth floor and found door number 1903. I looked about for a suitable hiding place and discovered an unlocked utility closet. I returned to 1903, pressed the buzzer, and quickly retreated to the closet, leaving the door open a fraction of an inch.

Who would answer the door? Richard Walker? Or a servant, if he had one? No. I thought that at this hour of the morning—nearly four—the one who answered the door would most likely be the one who was still awake, and that should be the young woman I had been following.

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CARDULA

I was correct.

She opened the door and peered up and down the hall. Frowning, she closed the door again. I heard the bolt being shot home.

At the office, Janos was waiting, and as we drove home I told him about the second purse-snatching incident.

He was thoughtful. "This assailant, he was masked again?"

I nodded.

Janos sighed. "We have here a number of coincidences. First, there is the coincidence of your being at the same point, at the same time, two nights in a row."

"That isn't a genuine coincidence, Janos. I was watching the Schwendtke apartment. I quit at my usual time in such a case, and took the shortest route back to the office."

Janos frowned. "But then we have the coincidence of your tossing that man upon a trash container two successive nights."

"That also isn't as much of a coincidence as it first appears, Janos. When one throws anything one instinctively or unconsciously aims at something—a tree, a rock, a tin can. The trash container was simply the nearest logical target."

Janos pursued the point. "This trash container, sir. Was it the *same* trash can as last night?"

I pondered. "No, Janos, now that I remember it, there were two trash containers at the curb some fifty feet apart. Last night I destroyed one and tonight the other."

Janos was greatly relieved. "For a moment I had fears that you might have broken through a time warp and were doomed to repeat this episode over and over again. However—if I remember the rules for such situations correctly—it would have had to be the same trash can both nights."

Janos increased his speed on the freeway. "But we are still faced with the coincidence of this woman being on the street at the same early hour twice in succession and twice having someone trying to steal her handbag. And both attempts, apparently, by the same man."

"Janos," I said, "I could have sworn that he was a hospital case the first time I threw him through the air. I was at least positive that his right wrist would have to be put into a cast. Yet the very next night he reappears, hale and hearty."

Janos brightened. "I believe I have the answer to that conundrum, sir. This was not one and the same person twice, but two different people who happened to be twins. Or possibly two of triplets, or quadruplets or quintuplets."

I agreed.

"You're right, Janos. Tomorrow I'll be at the same place at the same time to see if we are dealing with twins, triplets, or whatever."

I began the next evening, however, by resuming my surveillance of Miss Schwendtke's apartment. At ten, Decker left alone, carrying his suitcase.

He found a taxi downstairs and I followed as it drove him back to his own residence and, possibly, the arms of his wife.

I returned to my office, typed a report to Mrs. Decker, and, along with my bill, mailed it to her.

I spent the next few hours waiting for new clients—of which there were none. Finally at three A.M., I decided that instead of waiting for the Walker woman at her usual place, I might just as well begin the episode by following her from her apartment.

It was fortunate that I did, because when she came out of the building at three-thirty, she turned instead in a new direction.

She again carried the large handbag, however, and this time she stopped at the lighted display window of a book store. She appeared to be studying the book jackets, but now and then she glanced covertly up and down the almost deserted street.

Finally, she turned and went quickly to the metal trash container at the curb. Opening her handbag, she pulled out a large brown package and pushed it through the swinging top. Then she walked briskly away, without looking back.

I frowned. Trash containers seemed to play an inordinately large part in this case.

My eye caught a movement down the block. A tall man carrying a briefcase stepped onto the sidewalk from the darkness of a doorway where he had evidently been lurking.

He approached the trash container, reached inside, and groped about until he pulled out the brown package. He quickly slipped it into his briefcase and departed.

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He drove for some twenty minutes, turning constantly and doubling back in an obvious effort to throw off anyone who might be following him. Finally, he headed for the industrial valley of the city and stopped in front of a large grimy warehouse.

After he entered the building, I myself found an opening through which I could slip.

The warehouse appeared to be filled to the rafters with bales of paper pulp.

From the advantage of height, I watched the tall man move down an aisle toward a corner which was separated from the rest of the building by eight-foot partitions.

I looked down into the enclosed space and saw two battered desks, some filing cabinets, and several chairs.

And tied securely to one of the latter was a man of about fifty, greying at the temples.

A heavy man wearing a gun in a shoulder holster greeted the tall man. "Well, Maxie, how did it go *this* time?"

Maxie patted the briefcase. "Like clockwork, Pete." He removed the package, tore off the paper cover, and poured bundles of currency onto one of the desks.

While they counted the packs of bills, I put two and two together. Obviously this was a kidnapping. The man tied to the chair bore a certain resemblance to the woman in apartment 1903, and I deduced that he was probably her father.

He had been kidnapped and a ransom had been demanded.

Elizabeth Walker had left her apartment with instructions to deposit the money in a certain trash container on a downtown street.

But two unexpected things had happened. One, the purse snatcher had made an appearance, and, two, so had I. And in the ensuing action I had destroyed the very trash container into which she was to deposit the ransom money.

She had had no recourse but to return to her apartment and await further instructions from the kidnappers.

The tall kidnapper, Maxie, had probably been watching from a doorway and seen the incident. And acting on the wholly logical assumption that the purse-snatching could not reoccur in a hundred years, he had phoned her again and instructed her to repeat the errand

the next morning, this time dropping the package into a trash container further down the street.

But once again history had repeated itself and another trash container had been obliterated.

Maxie, however, was not one to give up on trash containers, and a third time he directed her to another location. This time the transaction had gone off without a hitch.

Below me, they finished counting the money.

"Well, Pete," Maxie said, "it's all there. We had the damndest time, but it worked."

Pete seemed to study him. "I been thinking things over, Maxie, and I just don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?"

"This story you brung me twice about the purse-snatcher and the gent in black clothes who tosses him like a rag doll thirty feet or more onto trash cans."

"I know it's crazy, Pete, but it happened."

Pete eased his gun from the holster. "No, Maxie. I'll tell you what really happened. The first time you picked up the money all right, but you hid it somewhere and come to me with the story about the purse-snatching. And then when you phoned the Walker dame again, you told her that the fifty grand was nice but that we wanted another fifty before we'd let her old man go."

"You got it all wrong, Pete."

Pete shook his head. "And the first time went so good, that you figured why not try it just once more. So you hid the second fifty grand too and came back to me with the same story you used the first time."

"Pete, I swear . . ."

"So you call the dame a third time, and once again she comes up with another fifty grand. But now you figure you can't pull the same deal any more; so you finally bring the money here." Pete glowered. "I say that you got a hundred grand packed away somewhere and now you even got the nerve to expect to get half of this last fifty thousand. In short, Maxie, you wind up with a hundred and twenty-five thousand, and I get a lousy twenty-five. Now somehow that don't seem to me to be fair." The automatic moved ominously.

Maxie paled and quickly held up a hand.

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CARDULA

me, the money's lost." He licked his lips. "I'll show you where all of it is, just don't, don't . . ."

I nodded admiringly. Fast thinking on the part of Maxie. To continue claiming innocence would simply have led to his immediate death. But by confessing to a double-cross of which he was not guilty, he not only spared his life for the precious moment, but also gained time and the possibility of turning the tables later.

However, I thought that it was about time for action on my part. I left my rafter and dropped down to the cement floor directly in front of Pete.

He swore with surprise at the suddenness of my appearance and pulled the trigger of the automatic, the bullet ricocheting off my meso-sternum.

I flicked the weapon from his hand and then dealt him a side-handed blow which rendered him disinterested and oblivious to all further proceedings.

In the meantime, Maxie had broken a chair over my head. I turned on him and heaved him high over the partition walls. He disappeared from my sight and landed somewhere in the warehouse proper with a satisfactory crunch.

I untied Walker and used the desk phone to call the police.

Walker was still wide-eyed. "You must be wearing a bulletproof vest."

I glanced at my watch. I could not wait for the police to arrive. They would insist on detaining me for questioning and that wouldn't do this close to daylight:

"Who are you?" Walker asked.

I smiled sparingly. "At the moment I prefer to work with a certain degree of anonymity."

"But you deserve a reward."

Reward? Well, perhaps something, I thought. After all, I had put in some time on this job, authorized or not. And my suit and shirt had been ruined by that bullet.

Perhaps he could slip me a few hundred from the ransom money? But no. He would need all of it for evidence when the police arrived.

I consulted my watch again. "I'm sorry, but I cannot remain a moment longer. However, I shall get in touch with you again. Perhaps tomorrow evening."

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When I left, I passed Maxie senseless upon the remains of a metal trash container.

I frowned. Now *that* was a coincidence.

I arrived at my office to find a worried Janos. We wasted no time reaching the minibus and arrived home three minutes before sunrise.

At sunset later in the day, Janos drove me to the Walkers' apartment building.

On the nineteenth floor, I pressed the buzzer at door 1903.

Elizabeth Walker answered the door. Her eyes widened. "Good heavens, it's *you* again!"

Walker came to my rescue. "Elizabeth, this is the man I was telling you about."

She allowed me to enter, but with some reluctance.

The Walker quarters were large and it was obvious from their furnishings that they had enough money to be worth kidnapping.

A middle-aged, sullen-faced woman in a cloth coat appeared from one of the side doorways. "I'm going now," she announced curtly. "I'll be back about nine."

When she was gone, Walker said, "That was Maggie. She's a bit surly, but live-in servants are hard to find these days." He turned to his daughter. "Where is she going?"

"To the hospital to see her brothers. You remember them, don't you? They pick up Maggie every once in a while to take her to a movie or something."

Walker nodded. "Oh, yes. The twins."

"It's the strangest coincidence," Elizabeth said. "First one of them had some kind of an accident and broke his right wrist and some ribs. And the very next day exactly the same thing happened to the other twin. Maggie's tight-lipped about the whole thing and I probably wouldn't know about the accidents at all except that she was out both times when the hospital called."

I had, of course, been listening with a great deal of attention. "When you went out to deliver the ransom money, did Maggie know why you were going out and where?"

Elizabeth nodded. "After all, she was in on the ground floor as far as the kidnapping was concerned. When she went to answer the door, those two kidnappers forced their way into the apartment."

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In on the ground floor? Was she a part of the kidnapping conspiracy? No, I didn't think so. Pete had spoken of a fifty-fifty split. There had been no mention of Maggie or her brothers.

Nevertheless, Maggie must have seen the opportunity to profit from the kidnapping herself. She had dispatched one of her brothers to the point where the kidnap money was to be delivered. He was to snatch Elizabeth's handbag and Maggie and her brothers would be fifty thousand dollars happier.

But that attempt had failed and so had the second. I wondered if there would have been a third try if Maggie's brothers had been triplets.

I sat down and proceeded to tell the Walkers why they should begin looking for a replacement for Maggie.

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